

Weeds: A Link with the Past



2. Purslane

Purslane, wild portulaca, or pusley (*Portulaca oleracea*), is a small plant which appears each spring in the Arboretum, growing flat against the ground in the nurseries surrounding the greenhouses.

The origin of purslane is buried in prehistory. Alphonse De Candolle, in *The Origin of Cultivated Plants*, wrote that *Portulaca oleracea* was “one of the kitchen garden plants most widely diffused throughout the old world from earliest time,” and was found in India, Greece, and Persia.

Purslane was mentioned in the “Natural History” of Pliny as one of the vegetables used by the Romans. Pliny, or Gaius Plinius Secundus, usually referred to as Pliny the Elder, was a Roman living about 23–79 A.D. He compiled an encyclopedia,

Historia Naturalis, which dealt with many subjects as they were known at that time, including geography, the fine arts, zoology, and botany. He also included food and food plants — among them cabbage, cucumber, turnip, parsnip, and purslane.

In the 16th century John Gerard described the use of purslane: “Rawe Purslane is much used in salads with oile, salt, and vinegar.” John Parkinson, a writer and herbalist who lived about the same time as Gerard, had a more colorful use for purslane. He wrote that purslane was not only a remedy for a crick in the neck, but also for “blastings by lightning, or planets, and for burnings by Gunpowder or otherwise.” This somewhat dramatic information was revealed in a guide to gardening entitled *Paradisus in Sole Paradisus Terrestris*. Parkinson appears to have been fond of puns, because the title may be translated from the Latin as “Park in Sun, Park on Earth.”

What was perhaps the first “Salad Cook Book” was written in 1699 by John Evelyn, a London gentleman-farmer. Called *Acetaria, a Discourse of Sallets*, it gave, among other things, instructions for making purslane pickle. In this country one of Bernard McMahon’s seed catalogs which was printed in Philadelphia about 1800 listed two kinds of purslane: “Green Garden Purslane” and “Golden Purslane, a variety.”

However, not everyone agreed about the virtues of purslane; in 1821 William Cobbett wrote in *The American Gardener*, perhaps a little unkindly, that purslane was a “mischievous weed that Frenchmen and pigs eat when they can get nothing else. Both use it in salad, that is to say, raw.”

Henry Thoreau, in *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854), mentioned the use of purslane: “I have made a satisfactory dinner on several accounts, simply off a dish of purslane which I gathered in my cornfield, boiled and salted.”

Last summer when I discovered a crop of purslane growing in one of my flower beds, inspired by my reading, I allowed the plants to grow. In a month they became large and sturdy, with succulent triangular leaves and thick juicy stems. I harvested them and boiled them gently just a few minutes until they were barely tender. Drained, salted lightly, and generously buttered, they make a delicious vegetable, more tender than the most delicate young spinach leaves, the stems tasting slightly of acid.

Perhaps those of us who raise our own vegetables, struggling with temperamental plants, fertilizing, dusting, and spraying, are overlooking a good vegetable when we pull purslane up by the roots and fling it on the mulch pile.

HELEN ROCA-GARCIA

Notes from the Arnold Arboretum

Malus 'Donald Wyman'

During the past few years staff members have become interested in a crab apple tree which was first noticed on the grounds of the Arnold Arboretum as a spontaneous seedling prior to 1950. The reason for our recent interest results from observation of its ability to retain its fruit, in good condition, well into the winter months when the fruit of nearly every other crab apple in the collection has either dropped, been eaten by the birds, or has turned brown and unattractive.

Under our conditions the tree flowers annually and has consistently produced a heavy crop of glossy, bright red fruits which average 1 cm. in diameter. As winter progresses the color will fade, but even by the end of March enough red is retained to classify the fruits as having definite ornamental value throughout the entire winter.

The tree will also be of interest to those who plant crab apples as a source of food for birds. We have noted during the past two winters that the fruits seem to mature or become palatable to birds at varying times throughout the season. They are not taken all at once as is the case with some of the other crab apples that have persistent fruit; therefore, it may be considered as a source of "slow-release" bird food.

The buds are pink but they open to single, white flowers which are 4.5 cm. across when fully expanded. During four years in which detailed observations were made, heaviness of flowering was rated from moderately heavy to very heavy. Our specimen is a small tree, sixteen feet tall, of compact growth habit. It may be seen on the SW side of Peters Hill just across the road from the *Alnus* collection.

A tree of this sort will be a valuable addition to the winter landscape, and for this reason we are naming it in honor of Dr. Donald Wyman as a small tribute to his many years of interest in this fine group of ornamental trees. *Malus* 'Donald Wyman' has been propagated in limited quantity during the past winter and will soon be made available to nurserymen who participate in our Cooperating Nurserymen Program. We hope that, before long, it may become available to the general public.

ROBERT S. HEBB

The International Plant Propagator's Society —

Nineteenth Annual Meeting

The Eastern Region of the International Plant Propagator's Society met for its annual program on December 3, 1969, at the Hotel Commodore in New York City. Meetings of this society move about each year and are held in various parts of the eastern United States. The 1967 meeting, for example, was held in Mobile, Alabama, while that for 1968 took place in Toronto, Canada. To celebrate the society's Twentieth Anniversary, the Eastern and Western regions will gather at middle ground for a combined meeting to be held in September of this year at St. Paul, Minnesota. This will be the first joint session for the two regions, and a delegation from the newly formed region of Great Britain and Ireland also plans to attend.

The first day of the meeting was devoted to a tour of the various horticultural organizations in the Long Island area with the initial stop being at Planting Fields Arboretum, Oyster Bay. A few statistics relative to Planting Fields — formerly the renowned William Robert Coe Estate — show that it is a year-round horticultural center about one hour from New York City by car. Included in its 409 total acres are 160 permanently preserved as an arboretum, 200 devoted to fine woodlands, and five to a synoptic garden which includes over 400 species of woody taxa. In the bulb collection are over 80,000 plants, including 140 varieties of daffodils. A number of service greenhouses are used to raise plants for the 22,000 square foot display houses. When we visited poinsettias were being readied for a Christmas show; at Easter lilies are featured.

The next stop was at the Christie Estate located in Mutton-town. An outstanding collection of abnormal conifers had been brought together here. On viewing these remarkable specimens one gets the impression that they were planted many years ago. However, this is not the case. L. K. Christie, who met an untimely death several years ago, sought large specimens throughout Long Island and had them moved to the location at great expense. Among these oddities are conifers that are dwarf, slow-growing, pendulous, fastigate, variegated, etc. The future of this unique collection had been in question since the owner's demise. However, a recent arrangement has been made whereby the Nassau County Park System has agreed to take over. Therefore, it will not be lost to horticulture.

During the afternoon we visited two commercial nurseries. At the Johnson Avenue Rare Plant Nursery there was a large collection of unusual plant material. Mr. Joseph Cesarini, the

proprietor, is a natural born plant collector and displays many rarely seen specimens in his miniature arboretum. Mr. Cesarini certainly does not spend time in wasted motion, for at his establishment are twenty-five large plastic houses of container-grown plants which are managed with only one full-time and two part-time employees.

On December 4th we began the first of five formal sessions which were to cover two and one-half days. The emphasis of this opening session was placed on research techniques. The highlight was an excellent talk on the "Principles of In Vitro Culture," given by Toshio Murashige, University of California, Riverside, California.

During the second session, devoted to "Propagation Techniques" and moderated by Joseph Cesarini, procedures used in the vegetative propagation of plants were discussed. Included among the presentations were papers on production of "Juvenile Shoots from Root Pieces," "Outdoor Softwood Cutting Propagation," "Softwood Cuttings under Polyethylene Tents," and "A Practical System of Cold Frame Propagation," by Mr. P. D. Orum of D. Hill Nursery Company, Dundee, Illinois. Many were interested in the latter because of the relatively inexpensive techniques recommended. Much interest was also indicated in the production of juvenile shoots from root pieces. That presentation dealt with a successful method of propagating several plant species which cannot otherwise be rooted from cuttings.

Plant nutrition and growth came in for their share of attention during the second session of the afternoon. In addition to other topics, two papers dealt with regulators which retard growth and their effect on budding and hardiness of rhododendrons. These were particularly interesting because of their importance to those concerned with raising rhododendrons and azaleas.

During the morning of December 5th attention was focused on the propagation of specific plants. Perhaps a safe statement to make here is that a plant must be difficult to propagate and offer some important asset in order to receive consideration at this session. Included were discussions on *Prunus serotina*, *Acer griseum*, and *Hamamelis*, and the techniques involved in handling cuttings from white pine witches'-broom seedlings. It is good to note the greater trend toward cooperation among the various groups who are interested in the same plants. An example of this was the paper on "Mist Propagation" of black cherry (*Prunus serotina*). This subject is of great importance to the lumber industry, and the vegetative propagation of specific

clones with desirable characteristics is, therefore, significant. *Acer griseum* is a tremendously appealing plant, and the presentation dealing with its propagation was based on factual information which came about through research.

Problems of management and cultural practices are often overlooked at meetings such as these. Not so here, however, for the entire Friday afternoon session was devoted to managerial problems. Such items as cost analysis, schedules, mechanization, water usage, stock scion hardiness relationships, and breeding of woody ornamental plants were covered in considerable detail.

The final portion of the afternoon program featured the regularly scheduled presentation of "New Plant Introductions" moderated by Alfred J. Fordham.

Both the authors feel that "bull sessions" are often among the most rewarding parts of these meetings. The evening of December 5th would fit this category, for it was then that the question and answer period was held. A question box is set up at the start of the meetings, and throughout the sessions the participants are urged to contribute questions which are then posed by a moderator and answered from the floor. This part of the program has great appeal, and attendance is always high. It is a rare occasion when someone from this group of specialists cannot furnish an answer to any question.

ALFRED J. FORDHAM

ROBERT C. KENNEDY

Mercer Fellow

Summary of weather data recorded at the Dana Greenhouses, February and March 1970.

	Precipitation	Avg. 8 a.m. Temp.
February	4.97	26.75
March	3.71	33.8

Editors' Note: In the review on page 77 of our March 15th issue, the American Museum of "National" History should, of course, be the American Museum of Natural History. Our apologies to our readers and the institution.